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**Directorate of Intelligence**  
**Office of African and Latin American Analysis**

15 August 1985

NOTE FOR: Deputy Director for Intelligence

SUBJECT: Downside Risks Assessment on  
South Africa

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Attached is  alternative assessment, addressing prospects for rapid and radical change in South Africa. The assessment, while not intended to track the SNIE, challenges several generally held assumptions about the process and rate of change in South Africa. Also, the paper offers three insightful scenarios on how change--gradual, rapid, and crisis--might occur.

We in ALA believe she did a very good job.

State Dept. review completed

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Chief  
Africa Division

cc: DD/ALA  
NIO/Africa

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15 August 1985

## MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: South Africa: Prospects for Rapid and Radical Change--The Downside Risks

As the racial violence in South Africa continues to flare, the need to take a hard, critical look at conditions for radical change will only grow. In general, predictions that Pretoria will continue to dictate the pace of political reform and that nonwhite opposition will not become strong enough to force an end to white minority rule are based on a number of broad assumptions:

- The current unrest fits into the pattern of episodic violence that has beset South Africa for decades. Blacks will eventually run out of steam, and the townships will return--at least for the short term--to their previous state of uneasy calm.
- The white authorities are still capable and willing to employ whatever security measures prove necessary to restore a semblance of order to the black townships.
- White leaders, through a combination of limited political reforms and the extension of greater economic benefits to urban blacks, will be able to coopt a sizable black middle class. These blacks will grudgingly accept whatever system of political participation the government devises, rejecting violent protest in order to preserve their economic gains. This "coopted" black urban middle class will serve as a force for stability in the townships.
- White political leaders have firm "redlines" concerning political reforms that they will not cross. Because whites have a clear concept of what they do not want to do, they will not be pushed by violence and civil disobedience into initiating hasty reforms that could open the door for real powersharing with nonwhites at the national level. An increase in white casualties is one of the few developments that could erode white resolve.

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The risk, of course, is that one or more of these key assumptions is off the mark. To the extent that these underlying conditions fail to hold up, the odds increase that South Africa could undergo fundamental change in the near term.

### Challenging the Key Assumptions

While some observers believe that the critical conditions for fundamental stability in South Africa continue to hold, there is ample evidence to argue the contrary. Indeed, numerous events suggest that at a minimum each of the key assumptions underpinning a stability scenario is in doubt. In some cases, the risk also exists that gaps in our knowledge have blindsided analysis or allowed us to avoid facing up to major uncertainties.

**The current unrest fits into the pattern of episodic violence that has beset South Africa for decades. Blacks will eventually run out of steam, and the townships will return--at least for the short term--to their previous state of uneasy calm.**

The recent nonwhite violence in South Africa differs in many significant respects from previous periods of unrest, and these differences could very well mean that the violence will be self-sustaining and much more difficult to contain. The circumstances surrounding the violence and the nature of the violence itself are fundamentally different from Sharpeville in 1960 and Soweto during 1976-77. The greater number of attacks against black collaborators alone support this conclusion, but other important distinctions can be drawn.

- For the first time in South African history, significant nonwhite opposition to the regime is occurring during the tenure of a white government committed to changing the apartheid system. Regardless of whether or not violence actually influences government reform policy, nonwhite leaders perceive that their actions are making a difference. According to Embassy reporting, such UDF leaders as Alan Boesak believe they have the government on the run. This perception gives many blacks a new, concrete reason to continue defying the government.
- Violence is occurring at a time when South Africa is experiencing its worst economic recession since the institution of apartheid. Economic problems have always been recognized as a contributing factor to nonwhite unrest, but not enough attention has been paid to the severe impact that this economic downturn has had on blacks. The three-year drought, for

example, has resulted in critical shifts in the black population. The Consulate in Cape Town reports the black population in Eastern Cape townships has grown by as much as 30 percent in the past year because of harsh conditions in rural areas and cutbacks in employment by white farmers. The addition of unemployed, frustrated blacks to the pool of already economically hard-hit township residents has contributed to levels of violence that the English South African press describes as approaching a state of civil war.

- The unrest is occurring at a time when blacks have the majority buying power in the South African economy. Although many blacks are unemployed or barely make a living wage, other blacks involved in the modern economy are able to buy a wide range of consumer goods. This has significant implications for the potential efficacy of future black consumer boycotts. Whereas past boycotts have faltered because blacks eventually had to break down and buy the necessities of life, today blacks can cut back on "luxury items" and still hurt the white economy. As it is, clothing and furniture merchants have been among the hardest hit in the six-week boycott of white establishments in the Eastern Cape.
- The current unrest is occurring during a period of heightened international criticism of South Africa and when some nations have imposed economic sanctions and others are giving sanctions serious consideration. Blacks know they are playing to an international audience and that the recent US domestic criticism of "constructive engagement" is in large part a reaction to the continuing violence. They have been encouraged further by such moves as New Zealand's decision to call off its rugby tour.
- The growing black labor union movement is also a new element in the South African equation, although it has yet to play an important role in the current unrest. National labor leaders have hesitated to become actively involved in politics per se lest they invite government retribution. This, however, has not stopped local union leaders from becoming involved in local political issues, and the national unions have, as they did last November, again supported calls for work stayaways and consumer boycotts in the Transvaal. The labor movement is essentially an untapped resource in the black drive to force the government to address basic political issues, and national union leaders probably will become less reticent to use their power if violence persists. Some labor leaders have national political aspirations, and they cannot afford to hesitate too

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long lest they be perceived as not having contributed to the winning of black political rights.

- The current unrest is also marked by the existence of more vocal national black leaders who are making explicit demands of the government. Today black leaders across the ideological spectrum are demanding specific responses from the white government. Bishop Tutu, Alan Boesak, Chief Buthelezi, and even "moderate" groups--such as the black Chamber of Commerce and the association of black township mayors are making the same demands--free Nelson Mandela unconditionally, hold a national convention where blacks and whites together agree upon political reforms, and eliminate the last vestiges of apartheid. In addition, many of these black leaders are seemingly "untouchable"; despite South African claims that they are immune to external pressure, the legitimacy afforded by the international community to men such as Tutu, Boesak, and Buthelezi has almost certainly made the government think twice about acting against them.

A number of other issues also call into question the assumption that the current unrest is just part of an ongoing pattern. One cannot dismiss the idea that the current situation is marked by much higher levels of hatred and fearlessness among blacks. This is a critical factor in assessing the ability of blacks to sustain violence and civil disobedience, but also the most difficult to measure. We have assumed that most blacks--the silent majority--are essentially passive, want a restoration of order, and are unwilling to risk material benefits for ephemeral political gains. Much of this analysis is based on precedent and on polls that continue to indicate blacks favor peaceful change and place greater emphasis on economic issues.

Can we really bank on the reliability of such polls? Would polls in pre-revolutionary Iran or Nicaragua have indicated that their citizens welcomed violence and were disinterested in pocketbook issues?

the ability of our mission officers to operate in black townships is severely limited. Much of the reporting indicating unprecedented levels of black frustration is anecdotal, but it should not be lightly dismissed. It is the only recent evidence we have. In addition, the assumption that the majority of blacks must favor violence if it is to be effective or that black groups must be unified is historically flawed; most revolutionary situations are driven by sizable and dedicated minorities.

Finally, we have already written extensively about the generational gap in the townships; black youths are much more radical than their elders, they are unemployed, they are captives of a dismal educational system. The majority of blacks in South Africa are under the age of 18.

Unlike earlier periods of violence when large numbers of militants left to join ANC training outside the country, these youths will remain in the townships because ANC activities in neighboring countries have been effectively curtailed. If current levels of unrest persist, black youths will grow up in an environment where violence is the norm. Once large segments of a community accept the inevitability of violence, as happened in Lebanon, it becomes much more difficult to restore order.

**The white authorities are still capable and willing to employ whatever security measures prove necessary to restore a semblance of order to the black townships.**

The white authorities to date have been unable to restore order in the black townships, and whites may be less willing to resort to systematic brutality to contain black violence.

- Whites, in fact, may already be hesitating to crack heads. Press and Consulate reporting on the violence in the Eastern Cape points out that during the months preceding the declaration of the state of emergency, the South African security forces often adopted a hands off attitude toward much of the unrest, to the extent that some black militants were openly boasting of "liberated" townships where the police dared not enter. The police, however, argue that they were judiciously avoiding knee-jerk reactions that might only exacerbate tensions. Similarly, the police delayed entering the black townships around Durban during the recent violence there. Some attributed the delay to clever tactical machinations on the part of the Afrikaner-led police force; the press, however, described confused security officials uncertain of what their next step should be. The truth in both instances is probably somewhere in between. What is important, however, is that blacks may perceive that the government is not as quick to respond as it once was, and that they will have at least some opportunity to act with relative impunity.
- The verdict is not yet in on whether the state of emergency has worked to lessen violence in the affected townships and it has certainly not reduced tensions. During the four weeks that the emergency has been in effect, there have been approximately 110 deaths from black violence. Approximately 60 were in the Durban townships, leaving some 50 deaths, many of which presumably occurred in the townships affected by the proclamation. Many of the reports concerning the efficacy of the state of emergency have come from the police, and South African newspapers question whether official accounts are completely accurate. Most important, however, the state of

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emergency can only be judged effective if violence does not resume in townships once the heavy army and police presence is lifted.

- South Africa's security forces are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Much is made of the police's informer network; the South Africans always know who the troublemakers are. Yet, sketchy reporting indicates that the constant attacks against black collaborators have taken their toll on the informer network, particularly in the Eastern Cape townships. South African journalists have told our Consulate that the police force is the least informed player involved in the Eastern Cape violence. Much is also made of the size of the South African security forces; some 600,000 South Africans participate at least part-time in security or defense-related activities. Only about 150,000 of this number are full-time policemen or active-duty members of the military, however; the remainder are reserves and irregulars who are inexperienced in dealing with black unrest and probably would only exacerbate tensions. In addition, there are already indications that the regular security forces are spread thin by the demand of the current unrest. The press has speculated that yet another reason why police responded slowly to the Durban riots is that the authorities had to scramble to assemble a large enough task force. Moreover, the Financial Times of London recently quoted Anglo-American mining officials who believe that the government would have to order a large-scale mobilization of army reserves to quell any significant disturbances during the black miners' strike planned for later this month--a move, the officials added, which would be widely interpreted as proof that South Africa's unrest was increasingly out of control.

- About one half of the South African police force is nonwhite, mostly black. Black officers have to date been loyal to the white authorities, even though they, their families, and properties have been the targets of attacks by militant blacks. Some families of black officers have even been forced to move from the townships to police compounds. [redacted]

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[redacted] We thus probably will not have advanced warning of a change in the black policemen's commitment to defend white minority rule. This gap gains added significance in light of the government's plan for black townships to establish local police units that, in principle, would relieve the South African police of some of the responsibility for containing unrest. However, given the blacks rejection of Pretoria's

black town council system (29 of 32 councils are now defunct), there is little reason to believe the township's residents would accept the authority of such a police force.

- A decision by Pretoria to repress brutally black opposition would almost certainly set back government attempts to coax nonwhites into accepting its reform strategy. If we argue that Botha and his allies are looking for a longterm solution to the country's political problems, then we have to be more specific about how this longterm commitment militates against the imposition of drastic and counterproductive shortterm measures. There are several reasons why this reform government may hesitate to be brutal: 1) The last thing Pretoria wants now are more black "martyrs", dead or imprisoned. President Botha needs to keep domestic and international attention focused on the nonwhite moderates; 2) The recent divisions in the Afrikaner polity has significantly reduced the number of archconservatives in the National Party--any move to use extreme force is likely to prompt sharp debate within a cabinet more evenly divided between moderates and conservatives. In addition, some whites who would approve of drastic measures no longer vote for the National Party and resorting to brutality probably would cost the party the support of some moderate English-speakers; 3) Botha or his successor face elections in 1989 and they probably believe that their prospects would suffer if whites perceived the National Party to be confused about its policy direction.

Finally, by working on the assumption that Pretoria will always act forcefully if violence poses a more serious threat to white political control, we run the risk of falling into some analytical traps. Specifically, we will always be tempted to assume that the reason whites have not acted is because the violence is not that serious, not because the whites may be equivocating.

**White leaders, through a combination of limited political reforms and the extension of greater economic benefits to urban blacks, will be able to coopt a sizable black middle class. These blacks will grudgingly accept whatever system of political participation the government devises, rejecting violent protest in order to preserve their economic gains. This "coopted" black urban middle class will serve as a force for stability in the townships.**

There are a growing number of indications that whites are unlikely to coopt a significant number of urban blacks through limited political reforms.



- Most blacks will not accept changes dictated from above. They demand participation in some form of national decisionmaking body that will formulate a new political dispensation for South Africa. During the last ten years, the overwhelming majority of politically-involved blacks have rejected such government-imposed changes; the growing militancy of township blacks and the uniformity in demands made by blacks across the ideological spectrum strongly suggest that they are not prepared to compromise on this fundamental issue.
- The black middle class is likely to become increasingly frustrated at the lack of improvement in their economic position. They probably will also become more pessimistic about their children's future, a concern that will add to their desire for long-term solutions to their economic, political, and social problems.
- Given South Africa's mediocre economic prospects, unemployed and underemployed blacks are likely to constitute an increasingly larger proportion of the urban black population. They will contribute to the endemic instability of black townships. As things now stand, South African economic growth during the remainder of the decade probably will lag behind the levels necessary to finance meaningful increases in social spending for the majority of blacks or to provide new jobs for the urban black population.

Even if some members of the black middle class do prosper, they will almost certainly not abandon their political aspirations. Many of their remaining economic goals, in fact, will be attainable only if blacks can influence government policy decisions. Prosperous blacks will want to live in better areas closer to their work, they will want equal education for their children, and improved public services. The black middle class realizes that a more equitable distribution of South Africa's limited economic resources will occur only when blacks have an effective political voice at the national level.

**White political leaders have firm "redlines" concerning political reforms that they will not cross. Because whites have a clear concept of what they do not want to do, they will not be pushed by violence and civil disobedience into initiating hasty reforms that could open the door for real powersharing with nonwhites at the national level. An increase in white casualties is one of the few developments that could erode white resolve.**

White political "redlines" have shifted significantly in the last ten years, and we cannot assume that this process has ended. White attitudes

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have changed dramatically even in the absence of black violence against whites.

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-- Other evidence suggests, however, that South African whites increasingly appreciate the need for fundamental changes in the apartheid system that would require whites to share national political power with blacks. Business leaders have continued to push for more rapid reform. One significant reflection of Afrikaner political attitudes is the editorial slant taken by prominent Afrikaans language newspapers. During the Soweto riots, the Afrikaans press, although it recognized the need for some change in the apartheid system, stressed the need for moderate and cautious political reforms. Today, many Afrikaans newspapers are urging the government to take political risks, arguing that whites--for their own self interest--must make a good faith effort to address black political demands. Some influential Afrikaner political leaders share this view. Our Embassy recently reported an influential Afrikaner journalist's account of a conversation with Minister of Cooperation and Development Viljoen, who is touted as a likely successor to Botha. According to the journalist, Viljoen sees his mission not as one of retaining Afrikaner political domination, but of preserving Afrikaner culture and society. The journalist maintains that Afrikaner leaders are divided between those who believe political dominance must be maintained and those who argue that preservation of the Afrikaner volk will require the surrender of significant political power.

-- This evolution of white political attitudes has occurred in the absence of any significant black attacks against whites. We have argued in the past that apartheid's economic contradictions and the psychological impact of the Soweto riots led whites to implement reforms that would have been unthinkable five years ago. Given this, it is logical to conclude that the current unrest and the refusal of blacks to accept government-imposed limits on reform will again force the white leadership to redefine the limits of acceptable change.

### Scenarios for Change

If the key assumptions are flawed, the risk of unexpected and perhaps sudden change only increases. Indeed, a case can be made that the white government in South Africa has already lost the political initiative. For

gradual reform to work, the government must be able to manipulate black attitudes. The widespread unrest during the past year and the refusal of even moderate blacks to cooperate with the government reflect Pretoria's failure.

If this is the case, the government during the next three to four years will confront persistent violence and growing international criticism. It will react to these developments by making vague promises of more fundamental reform, but these promises and whatever policies Pretoria does implement will not satisfy either audience.

In sum, Pretoria will be under strong and growing pressure to abandon its program of incremental reform and choose between its remaining two options: gamble that relying on repressive security measures can preserve white power over the long run or negotiating a political solution acceptable to legitimate black leaders. We believe that whites will weigh the potential costs of failure versus success and eventually conclude that political compromise is the only viable long-term option. Given the current pace of unrest, it would not be unreasonable to see South Africa with a black majority government by 1995.

#### Faster Change?

If black violence and civil disobedience activities intensify during the next two years, the white leadership could be forced to abandon its policy of incremental reforms even sooner. A major psychological shift will have occurred in white attitudes.

Nature of Black Opposition. Under his scenario, all forms of black protest activity will increase dramatically. Violence in black urban areas will make many townships ungovernable, particularly those in the Eastern Cape. As the number of townships rocked by turmoil rises, the resources of the security forces would be increasingly strained. Pretoria would have to rely on relatively inexperienced personnel--a development that would raise the risk of unintentional overreaction in delicate situations. Given this, attempts by security forces to restore order will have only a short-term effect, and the government will probably be forced to concentrate its resources on maintaining a modicum of stability in key black areas such as Soweto.

Black collaborators will continue to be targetted, and there will be an increase in attacks against Colored and Asian politicians who have supported the tricameral parliament. White civilian casualties will begin to increase.

The period will also be characterized by a more effective use of black economic leverage. To lessen the impact of consumer boycotts on

blacks, opposition leaders could opt to alternate the areas targetted. Labor strikes will become more frequent and be more closely connected to political events.

Government attempts to disrupt opposition activities by arresting black leaders will become increasingly ineffective. Blacks will be less willing to act as informants for the security services, making it more difficult for whites to identify key black activists. Small community organizations, operating under general guidelines from national black groups such as the UDF, will have direct responsibility for coordinating opposition activities.

Political Pressures on the Government. If the pace of violence accelerates, political pressures will build within the white establishment. National Party politicians will be increasingly concerned about the impact the continued unrest will have on the 1989 elections. White casualties and dissatisfaction with the government's inability to restore order will boost the appeal of rightwing parties among rural and blue-collar Afrikaners. At the same time, moderate English-speakers will be dissatisfied with the government's failure to implement successful reforms, and they may be tempted to vote for the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) or not vote at all. National Party strategists will be concerned that their numbers in parliament could be so diminished that they might have to form a tacit coalition with the PFP. PFP leaders will be reading the same polls, and they will be prepared to exact political concessions from the National Party in return for their parliamentary support.

White journalists, academics, and businesspeople will be constantly criticizing Pretoria's half-hearted reform efforts. In addition, local white leaders, alarmed at the continued effectiveness of black consumer boycotts in their communities, will be seeking to reach accommodations with local black leaders. Many black demands, however, will only be addressable at the national level.

International Pressures. Because of the continuing unrest, most foreign governments will have adopted some form of economic sanctions against South Africa. Even if a few of Pretoria's key Western friends continue to argue against the imposition of full economic sanctions, they will likely warn that continued Western support is contingent upon the government agreeing to black demands for a national political forum to discuss fundamental political reforms.

The externally-based insurgencies of the ANC and PAC will be only marginally more effective. Most black activists inside South Africa, however, will continue to associate their goals with those of the ANC, and continue to demand the release of Nelson Mandela.

A Crisis Occurs. These factors alone are unlikely to force white political leaders to cross the final "redline" during the next two years and agree to consult with blacks about real powersharing at the national level. The stage will have been set, however, for a dramatic event that precipitously breaks white resolve. While any number of possibilities could cause a major psychological jolt, some key contenders include:

- The assassination of a prominent black leader, such as Bishop Tutu in which the security services are somehow implicated. Black violence quickly would escalate to even higher levels. South Africa's Western supporters could no longer fend off the calls for mandatory and comprehensive international economic sanctions.
- A violent confrontation between blacks and security forces that results in unprecedented carnage that is shocking even by South African standards. Again, violence escalates and economic sanctions appear inevitable.
- Moderate Colored and Asian politicians, alarmed at the government's inability to protect them from black attacks and convinced that the white regime has lost the political initiative, threaten to leave the tricameral parliament unless Pretoria moves immediately to meet black political demands.

Regardless of the spark that sets off the explosion, the white political leadership will jump over intermediate reform steps and move directly to a multiracial national political convention. In such a setting, nonwhite leaders would likely insist that Nelson Mandela be released as a precondition to their attendance or make that their first nonnegotiable demand at the bargaining table.

Once they have made the jump, white leaders will be in a weak position to deflect nonwhite demands for maximum concessions. Nelson Mandela and other imprisoned leaders almost certainly would be released early on in the process. At a minimum, nonwhite leaders will demand and obtain white agreement to a government scheme that affords Coloreds, Asians, and blacks majority rule.

Such a rapid denouement, however, will still leave South Africa politically unstable.

- Divisions among nonwhites, exacerbated by several years of violence, will be difficult to bridge. Unequal distribution of South Africa's economic resources, not just between whites and nonwhites but between urban and homeland blacks, will persist.

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- Many whites are likely to leave South Africa, further exacerbating the country's economic problems. Other reactionary whites will resort to violence in an attempt to disrupt the transition to black rule.
- The Soviet Union, using the ANC as its entree, will undoubtedly work hard to gain influence with the new government.

Rapid changes in the political landscape of South Africa would also alter a broad range of international considerations. Both the United States and the Soviet Union would see numerous opportunities for new leverage as well as encounter unexpected problems in their relations with southern Africa. A political change in Pretoria would alter the dynamics of events in Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, and most of the front-line states. As existing client-patron relations are challenged, a new set of allegiances and bilateral ties will have to be forged.

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